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The Urban-Rural and Farm-Non-Farm Dichotomies: Are They Obsolete?

by

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1. Introduction

The urban-rural and farm-non-farm concepts are widely used in current life in both international statistics and national censuses. However, this widespread use has led to controversy because of the many different interpretations and applications to which these terms are subjected. This paper will attempt to rekindle an old debate by examining and clarifying the role of these concepts as they are used in the Census of Canada. The first part of the paper examines the urban-rural dichotomy, its opponents and their alternatives, its proponents and their definitions; the second part takes a similar look at the farm-non-farm dichotomy. The conclusion attempts to answer the initial question.

2. The Urban-Rural Dichotomy Debate

We shall begin by examining the opponents of the dichotomy, since they are generally the most vocal.

2.1 The Opponents

Opponents of the dichotomy are as old as the dichotomy itself.

However, rather than repeating what has already been stated many times over in the literature, I shall limit this discussion to a description of Statistics Canada's participation in a Workshop organized by the Council on Rural Development Canada in November 1978¹ to debate a definition of rural.

2.1.1 Arguments Against the Dichotomy

Opponents of the urban-rural dichotomy argue that in such a context, rural is defined "by default," since the dichotomy defines the urban and the rural is a heterogeneous "non-urban" category. For example, in the 1976 Census of Canada, "urban" was defined as an "area having a population concentration of 1,000 or more and a population density of 1,000 or more per

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square mile (386 per square kilometre).² The remainder is rural." This puts the truck-farmers of the Niagara Peninsula, the fishermen of the Lunenburg region, the exurbanites of Montreal, the farmers living in the small villages of Saskatchewan and the Inuits of Baffin Island all in the same category. A second argument, and the most popular one, is that there is no longer any real difference between the urban environment and the rural environment. The two are interpreted in such a way as to be virtually indistinguishable. The access to services is such that the rural environment can no longer be considered "deprived": the omnipresence of radio, television, home comforts and the same "urban" values is a behavioural equalizer that transcends place of residence.³

A third argument against the urban-rural dichotomy is that it is based on the ambiguity between population and environment. The current Canadian definition and that of most other countries is based on the notion that the urban population is that living in an "urban" environment, with "urban" being defined in terms of population size and density as opposed to roles, functions and lifestyles.

The foregoing arguments apply to the Canadian definition but would apply equally well to the American and French definitions.

2.1.2 Alternative Solutions

The positions of those who oppose the dichotomy range from nihilism to the continuum theory. Nihilism states that since there is no difference between the urban environment and the rural environment, the dichotomy is illusory, even dangerous, and should be abandoned. Most opponents of the dichotomy have adopted a more moderate stance. They contend that urban and rural are not in opposition (i.e. are not dichotomous) but rather flow smoothly and imperceptibly into one another. This is the



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continuum theory. The "continuum," i.e. the categories which would describe the transition from a remote and uninhabited environment to a "metropolitan" environment, remains to be defined. Examples of the continuum abound. I shall cite the two that were used in the Council on Rural Development Canada Workshop. The population concentration continuum is recommended by several users desiring more flexible categories and statistics. They would like to see the census publish data for various population concentrations such as those listed below, rather than only for rural (less than 1,000 population) and urban (over 1,000 population) areas.

500,000 population or over	5,000 to 9,999
100,000 to 499,999	2,500 to 4,999
50,000 to 99,999	1,000 to 2,499
25,000 to 49,999	500 to 999
10,000 to 24,999	Less than 500 population.

Users would then distribute the population as required and name the resulting categories.

Another working definition of continuum based on several variables was developed by R. Parenteau and discussed at the Council on Rural Development Canada Workshop.

His definition of continuum is as follows:

"The population of Canada is classified into four types by the summation of the scores assigned to the respective values of the four significant variables. The four types are: (1) the urban type (scores 12 to 16), (2) the pseudo-urban type (scores 8 to 11), (3) the rural non-farm type (scores 4 to 7), and (4) the rural farm type (scores 0 to 3). The four variables are: (1) population size, (2) population density, (3) proportion of total population living on census-farms, and (4) proportion of total population owning their dwellings."⁴

Population		Population density (per square mile) - Densité de population (au mille carré)		Proportion of total population living on census farms (percentage) - Proportion de la population totale demeurant sur des fermes de recensement (en pourcentage)		Proportion of total population owning their dwellings (percentage) - Proportion de la population total propriétaire de leur logement (en pourcentage)	
Values - Valeurs	Scores - Poids	Values - Valeurs	Scores - Poids	Values - Valeurs	Scores - Poids	Values - Valeurs	Scores - Poids
26,000 and over - 26,000 et plus	4	3,200 and over - 3,200 et plus	4	0	4	Less than 36 - Moins de 36	4
19,000 - 26,499	3	2,150 - 3,199	3	0.10 - 9.49	3	36.00 - 39.99	3
13,000 - 18,999	2	1,350 - 2,149	2	9.50 - 13.49	2	40.00 - 48.99	2
6,500 - 12,999	1	250 - 1,349	1	13.50 - 22.49	1	49.00 - 68.99	1
Less than 6,500 - Moins de 6,500	0	Less than 250 - Moins de 250	0	22.50 and over - 22.50 et plus	0	69 and over - 69 et plus	0

Source: Based on 1971 Census data.

Source: Basé sur les données du recensement de 1971.

However, any such definition is open to criticism regarding the number of categories, the variables used and the thresholds selected.

It is appropriate to conclude this review of the arguments and proposals of the opponents of the dichotomy by profiling the opponents themselves. Many of them are researchers interested in specific regional problems to which the standard definitions do not apply. Their attempts to obtain the most accurate information possible are thwarted (or so they say!) by the inflexibility of the available statistical tools.

2.2 The Proponents

The proponents of the urban-rural dichotomy feel it is still useful despite the criticism levelled at it by its detractors. However, their desire to preserve it does not blind them to its shortcomings. There are various suggestions for modifications in the establishment of the dichotomy; the principal ones will be reviewed here.

2.2.1 Arguments For the Dichotomy

These arguments are essentially of a practical nature.

Use in International Comparisons

The United Nations establishes international comparisons of the degree of urbanization of its member countries. The implications of Canada's current degree of urbanization of 75% are open to question; however, this statistic is used as a "developmental" measure in comparisons with other countries.

Use in National Comparisons

If the urban-rural dichotomy was not defined in the census, how could one part of the country be compared with another? Each user would establish his own categories, levels and nomenclature, resulting in even greater confusion than that which currently exists: a number of different users are already defining their own categories.

Use in Chronological Comparisons

Statistics Canada's definition of the urban-rural dichotomy has varied only slightly from census to census. The increase in the urban proportion of the total population from 1901 to 1976 can be measured.⁵ In addition, the period 1971-1976 marked the emergence of a new "back to the land" movement⁶ which is not without interest. It followed on the heels of a similar phenomenon in the United States and may be an indication that an urbanization "saturation point" has been reached.

2.2.2 Possible Definitions

The positions adopted by the proponents of the dichotomy range from the status quo to the revision of thresholds and criteria. The status quo adherents believe it is better to keep the same definition of dichotomy despite its apparent shortcomings because it will facilitate chronological comparisons. In addition, the current definition is easy to understand and apply. It is also comparable to the definitions used in other countries.

Those who favour the revision of thresholds consider the current threshold required for a population concentration to be considered urban (1,000) too low. They suggest that it be increased to a minimum of 2,500, as in the United

States, or perhaps even to 5,000 or 10,000. Those who favour criterial revisions believe the urban-rural dichotomy is useful but note that the population size and density levels do not reflect the economic and social phenomena the dichotomy is supposed to measure. They therefore suggest various criteria, the most common of which are the percentage of the population living from primary industries, the access to metropolitan centres and the access to services.⁸

Most proponents of the dichotomy (even with modifications) are oriented towards practise as opposed to research, towards international or national studies as opposed to local studies.

The arguments and suggestions of both groups (both for and against the dichotomy) lead to a sort of common ground or neutral zone where a consensus may be reached. The urban-rural dichotomy is obsolete for detailed and regional analyses in which alternative solutions such as the continuum by size of concentration are particularly promising. On the other hand, the urban-rural dichotomy is still useful for trend analyses. However, the widespread use of computers will undoubtedly allow users to dispose of the concepts they consider cumbersome and establish their own definitions based on their own criteria.

3. The Farm-Non-Farm Dichotomy Debate

The farm-non-farm dichotomy published by the Census of Canada as a complement to the urban-rural dichotomy in the form urban - rural farm - rural non-farm is less known than the former. Nevertheless, it gives rise to the same type of debate. In this case, our source of experience is not the Council on Rural Development Canada Workshop but rather the studies of and discussions between the Census of Population and the Census of Agriculture during the planning of the 1981 Census.

3.1 The Opponents

The opponents in this particular debate were Census of Agriculture specialists.

3.1.1 Arguments Against the Dichotomy

The arguments against this dichotomy are as follows:

Lack of Distinction Between Farm and Non-Farm Population

Whereas in the beginning (1931 Census) there was a real difference between the population living on farms and that not living on farms, such a distinction is no longer meaningful. The farm and non-farm populations share a similar lifestyle: both have equal access to radio and television and most services. Farm homes are equipped in the same fashion as non-farm homes. It is essentially occupation that distinguishes persons living on farms from those who do not. Since farm operations are becoming increasingly complex and farm management increasingly industrialized, why should farmers be considered a select group any more than teachers or physicians.

The Fact that the Non-Farm Population is Defined "By Default"

The dichotomy defines the farm population, i.e. that living on farms or agricultural holdings whose area and sales of farm produce vary as defined by the census. The non-farm population is the "remainder," i.e. the population living neither on farms nor in population concentrations of over 1,000.

It therefore includes the farmers living in small villages, the Inuits of Baffin Island and the suburbanites skirting the highways to the metropolitan areas.

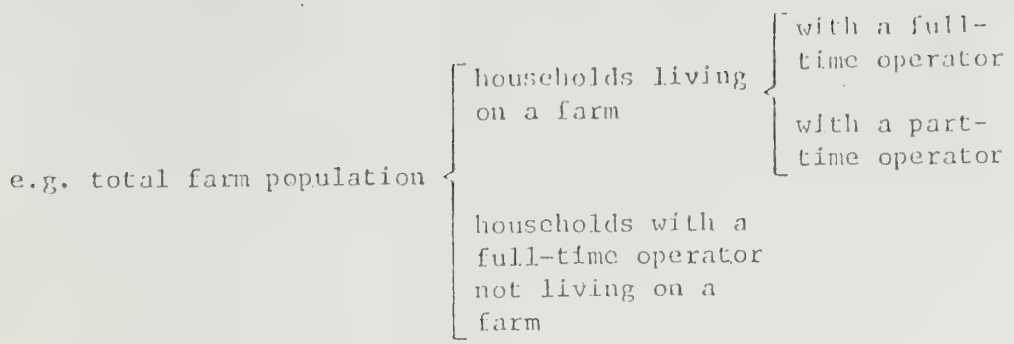
Ambiguity Between Population and Environment

What is intended to be measured by defining the farm population? Is the intention to distinguish an environment or a lifestyle? If an environment (e.g. isolation, low density) is being measured, it is acceptable to define the farm population as the population living on farms. If, however, the intention is to examine the population by level of activity and income, the concept of "population living from farming," including households of which one member works in an agricultural industry, would be more appropriate. The current ambiguity may also lead users to draw erroneous conclusions. Since the criteria used to define farms are very broad, some persons may live on farms without actually living from farming (e.g. part time farmers whose major source of income is urban employment), while others whose major source of income is farming may not live on farms (e.g. farmers in Saskatchewan who use their farm as a second residence).

The criticisms that can be made of the Canadian dichotomy also apply to the American dichotomy, but not to those of other countries which have two definitions: a Census of Agriculture definition (based on place of residence) and a Census of Population definition (based on economic activity).

3.1.2 Alternative Solutions

Nihilism has its adherents here as well, and the Census of Agriculture has decided to discontinue the publication of farm population data for the 1981 Census. Several other countries have also ceased to make this distinction in their census of population. Farm continuum adherents suggest that the Census of Population and Census of Agriculture questionnaires be linked, thereby permitting the derivation of all the necessary categories.



The population can be distributed into those groups whose major source of income is farming, those heads who are employed in an agricultural industry, etc. This flexibility also precludes the current mutual exclusiveness of the farm and urban populations (see introduction to 3).

Opponents of the dichotomy are either persons who are more interested in farming than in farmers or researchers who require more flexibility than the traditional dichotomy will allow.

3.2 The Proponents

The proponents of the farm-non-farm dichotomy believe it is still useful despite the criticisms levelled at it by its detractors; however, their desire to preserve it does not blind them to its shortcomings. There are various suggestions for modifications in the establishment of the dichotomy; the principal ones will be reviewed here.

3.2.1 Arguments For the Dichotomy

These arguments are similar to those advanced for the urban-rural dichotomy.

Use in International Comparisons

The FAO establishes the rules for the definition of farm population used in censuses of agriculture and its rules are extremely close to those used to date by the Canadian census. In any

case, it would be necessary to establish this dichotomy if only for this purpose. In addition, the farm proportion of the total population in both the United States and Canada is so low that it represents an absolute minimum of sorts that is of some interest.

Use in National Comparisons

The existence of a dichotomy, even an imperfect one, permits general comparisons between different parts of the country. It is also a definition which is simple, easy to understand and apply.

Use in Chronological Comparisons

The farm-non-farm dichotomy has been defined in the census since 1931. The definitional criteria have been modified slightly but not sufficiently to preclude comparability. The only major change is in total sales, which were increased from \$50 in 1971 to \$1,200 in 1976 and will be reduced to \$250 in 1981 (based on the rationale that \$50 in 1971 = \$250 in 1981).

Comparative 1976-1981 data will be prepared for this purpose. Together with the rural-urban dichotomy, the farm-non-farm dichotomy provides an accurate reflection of population movements in recent decades. The increase in the farm population of British Columbia coupled with an increase in its rural population, as described by R. Parenteau (op. cit. note 6), is an example of an interesting, even striking result.

3.2.2 Possible Definitions

The proponents have adopted positions varying from the status quo to the revision of inclusions and criteria. The status quo adherents believe it is better to have the same definition

of dichotomy, despite its apparent shortcomings, because it will facilitate chronological comparisons. In addition, it is easy to understand and apply and is also comparable to the definitions used in other countries.

Those favouring the revision of inclusions think that including the entire population living on farms leads to confusion. Some persons have "urban" homes on farm property and should be excluded. In the interests of specificity, only the households of farm operators living on farms will be included in the farm population as defined in the 1981 dichotomy.

Those favouring criterial revision feel the dichotomy should be based on economic or social factors as opposed to place of residence. The farm population would be that living from farming, i.e. those households whose head is employed in an agricultural industry, who is a farmer by trade or whose major source of income is farming.

4. Conclusion

The profound sociological differences between the "urban-rural" groups on the one hand and the "farm-non-farm" groups on the other hand are largely obscured by other differences such as metropolitan-non-metropolitan, core-fringe, large centre-small centre, truck farming-subsistence farming, centre-periphery, availability or lack of services, access or lack of access to a major centre, etc. In a developed country such differences are not used as developmental indices as they are elsewhere. They may be used for chronological comparisons and provincial or international comparisons.

New indices such as core-fringe which can be easily combined must therefore be developed to reflect the more complex situation of today. The linkage of the censuses of population and agriculture permits the establishment of a number of new classifications.

The rigid classes long used in census publications are a necessary minimum dictated by time constraints, available resources and national comparability requirements. Other definitions may be generated from the census data as well as a number of other sources. However, it is essential that the definitions that are used be carefully specified and clearly parameterized.

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